BELIEF IN A JUST WORLD AND THE PERCEIVED INJUSTICE OF DYING YOUNG OR OLD

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ABSTRACT

We investigated how belief in a just world (i.e., that people get what they deserve) affects the perceived injustice of dying young versus dying old. Younger and older adult participants completed a measure of their just world beliefs and then were randomly assigned to read one of four newspaper articles purportedly about a person who died in an automobile accident. In the articles, both the victim’s age (19 or 79) and the victim’s outlook on life (concerned about the future or living for today) were varied. Results indicated that participants viewed the death of a younger victim as more unjust than the death of an older victim. Older adults, however, experienced less negative affect than did younger adults when reading the article. Older adults also expressed a higher belief in a just world (BJW) than did younger adults. In addition, BJW was related to perceived justice. Participants with a higher BJW perceived the deaths of both victims as more tragic and unjust than did those with a low BJW. The victim’s outlook on life did not affect perceived justice. Implications for medical decision-making, the use of aggressive treatment, and the relative value of youth versus age are discussed.

*This research was supported in part by a National Institute on Aging training grant # AG00030, and by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada research grant (410-2000-0017) awarded to Alison Chasteen. Portions of this research were presented at the 50th annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1997.

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Expectations about age can affect how people react to someone’s death. For example, the death of a younger person may be perceived as more tragic than the death of an older person. Often cited reasons are that the younger person had more potential years ahead, could still contribute to society, and that such a loss is “tantamount to losing the future” (Jecker & Schneiderman, 1994, p. 67). By contrast, an older person has lived a full life, has had a “turn at bat,” and is possibly waiting for death. As the presented joke goes, the reporter’s comment is driven by expectations regarding death and age. Meeting a person in such advanced age again next year would be eventful. In response, the older person alludes that life is capricious—death can come to anyone at anytime.

The perceived tragedy of dying young versus dying old, however, may be a phenomenon of western industrialized society (Jecker & Schneiderman, 1994). Not only do cultural differences exist in how people view the death of younger and older people (Kalish, 1969, 1987), but also the answer to the question of whether it is more tragic to die young or old has varied through history (Jecker & Schneiderman, 1994). Some investigators have suggested that death is perceived as more tragic when it occurs at a younger age (e.g., Neugarten, 1979), and the death of a child or younger person has been associated with complications in grieving (Rando, 1993). Gamino, Sewell, and Easterling (1998, 2000) demonstrated that decedent age was negatively correlated with grief misery, suggesting that survivors experienced greater difficulties in grieving when the decedent was a child or young adult. Victim age has also been implicated in how people perceive health stereotypes (Madey & Chasteen, in press), make judgments about treatment (Barta Kvitek, Shaver, Blood, & Shepard, 1986), and allocate organs for transplant (Busschbach, Hessing, & Charro, 1993; Kilner, 1990). Surprisingly, however, little empirical work has investigated how dying young or old affects people’s sense of justice.

One goal of the present research was to empirically determine whether people perceive the death of a younger person as more unjust than the death of an older person. Although ethical, historical, and philosophical overviews of this divergence in perceived justice based on age have been provided (e.g., Jecker & Schneiderman, 1994), empirical validation of this perspective has yet to be demonstrated. (also, see Busschbach et al., 1993; Reynolds, 1979).

A second goal was to investigate individual differences in how people perceive the injustice of dying young or old. According to Janoff-Bulman (1992), people maintain some basic assumptions about the world, including the belief that the world is benevolent and meaningful, and that the self is worthy. A traumatic event often shatters these basic assumptions and alters the victim’s belief about the meaningfulness and benevolence of the world. Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) idea of
shattered assumptions dovetails with just world theory. Just world theory proposes that people believe in a world where others generally get what they deserve (Lerner, 1980; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Lerner & Simmons, 1966). A belief in a just world (BJW) has been shown to be adaptive and provides a buffer for what would otherwise be perceived as a random, precarious world. Acts of injustice are particularly disturbing for people with a high belief in a just world. According to just world theory, people can respond to perceived injustice in one of two ways. One way to restore violations of perceived justice is to compensate the victim. The other way is to decide that the victim probably deserved his or her fate.

Whether people with a high belief in a just world will help or derogate the victim depends on several factors. One factor is whether there is an opportunity to help (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). Another factor is whether the victim is perceived to be truly innocent of his or her fate (DePalma, Madey, Tillman, & Wheeler, 1999; Hafer, 2000; Stokols & Schopler, 1973). What remains unknown is whether people’s just world beliefs vary by age and also how their just world beliefs influence their reactions to tragedies involving either younger or older victims. These issues were investigated in the present study in order to advance our understanding of the boundary conditions for age-related biases regarding the death of younger and older people.

Another variable that could moderate the effect of people’s just world beliefs on perceived justice are the stereotypes people have regarding younger and older people. In this study we varied the victim’s outlook on life. Research has shown that people hold multiple stereotypes of older individuals (Brewer, Dull, & Lui, 1981; Brewer & Lui, 1984; Hummert, 1990; Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994; Schmidt & Boland, 1986). Often these stereotypes contain elements that refer to the older individual’s “outlook on life.” For example, Hummert (1990) found that some stereotypes of older individuals contain traits describing a negative outlook on life (e.g., “lives in the past,” “set in their ways,” and “waiting to die”) whereas other stereotypes contain traits describing a more positive outlook on life (e.g., “active,” “concerned about the future”). Because people might use some of these traits as confirmatory evidence for perceiving the death of an older person as more just than the death of a younger person (e.g., “she was only waiting to die”), we decided to vary the victim’s outlook on life. In one condition, the victim (either a younger or older adult) was oriented toward the future and thinking of tomorrow. In the other condition, the victim was portrayed as living for today and was oriented toward the present. If people use such information as validation for viewing the deaths of younger and older people differently, then participants should view the death of the elderly victim who was oriented toward the future as less just than the elderly victim who was focused only on today.

Another qualifying variable in people’s reactions to the death of younger or older people might be the participant’s age. People’s reactions to death are quite complex and multiply determined. It has been suggested that older adults may perceive the concept of death itself as less fearful than do younger adults.
(cf. Kastenbaum, 1992). We also investigated whether older adults would express less affect than younger adults when reading about the death of someone. Emotional reactivity may be regulated in complex ways (e.g., Carstensen & Charles, 1998) or possibly attenuated (e.g., Diener, Sandvik, & Larsen, 1985) in older adults (but also see Malatesta & Kalnok, 1984).

Finally, we also investigated participant age as a demographic variable in just world beliefs. The relationship between participant age and just world beliefs has been a relatively neglected area of study (Furnham & Procter, 1989). Studies that have sought to validate just world scales or to correlate these scales with other variables such as religiosity or life-satisfaction have generally used college undergraduates (e.g., Lipkus, Dalbert, & Siegler, 1996) or middle-aged adults (e.g., Dalbert, Lipkus, Sallay, & Goch, 2001). Also, because older adults generally score higher than younger adults on other constructs that correlate with just world beliefs, such as religiosity (e.g., Thorson & Powell, 2000), we investigated whether age differences would also be found for just world beliefs. We investigated just world beliefs using a scale developed by Lipkus, Dalbert, and Siegler (1996). This scale contains two subscales: just world beliefs about the self and just world beliefs about others. To our knowledge, no research is yet available on how participant’s age is related to just world beliefs on this BJW scale.

In the present study participants read a scenario in which a person died in an automobile accident. We investigated whether the age of the participant predicted perceived injustice and tested whether people with a high belief in a just world perceive the death of either victim as unjust regardless of age. Thus, this study allows us to test the following predictions and to explore several perspectives regarding age and death:

1. A main effect of victim age is anticipated. The death of a younger person will be perceived as more unjust and more tragic than the death of an older person. Further, participants will experience more negative affect in response to the death of a younger person than an older person.

2. A main effect for participant’s level of belief in a just world is predicted. People with a high belief in a just world will perceive the deaths of both the younger and older victims as more unjust and more tragic than will people with a low belief in a just world. Although an effect of BJW on perceptions of justice and tragedy is expected, it is less clear whether individual differences based on the participant’s age will translate into different emotional reactions to the death of a younger versus older person.

3. The effect of BJW on perceived injustice might be moderated by the participant’s age, the victim’s age, or the victim’s outlook on life. Because the literature often provides contradictory findings regarding participant’s age and reactions to death, and because there is no empirical research on the effects of victim’s age or outlook on life, we leave this part of the research as exploratory in nature.
METHOD

Participants

Participants were 79 older adults (29 males, 50 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 74.4$ years (63-90 years), $M_{\text{education}} = 14.4$ years) and 84 younger adults (25 males, 59 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 19.4$ years, (18-31 years), $M_{\text{education}} = 14.2$ years). The older participants were a community dwelling sample and were obtained from a participant pool maintained by the Aging and Development Program at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Older participants were recruited for the participant pool via newspaper advertisements and newsletter announcements. The younger participants were obtained from a pool of university undergraduates maintained by the department of psychology. This pool consisted of young adults from a variety of disciplines. For both the young and older adult samples, participants were selected randomly from their respective pools. All participants were paid $5.00 for their participation.

Measures

Belief in a Just World

This 18-item scale measures global beliefs in a just world but also consists of two subscales: belief in a just world for self and belief in a just world for others. The overall scale and the two subscales have been shown to have high internal reliability (Lipkus et al., 1996). Participants were presented with statements from the just world scale and indicated their level of agreement with each statement by circling a number from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree. Examples of items from the two subscales are: “I feel that the world treats me fairly” (self subscale), “I feel that people get what they deserve” (other subscale). In the present study, the overall BJW scale had high internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .89), as did the self subscale (Cronbach’s alpha = .85) and other subscale (Cronbach’s alpha = .81).

Affective Reaction

A total of 10, face-valid items were selected from the Positive Affect Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and the Multiple Affect Adjective Checklist (MAACL; Zuckerman, Lubin, & Rinck, 1983) to measure positive and negative affect. The subsequent scale consisted of five negative affect (upset, distressed, sad, downhearted, and angry; Cronbach’s alpha = .90) and five positive affect (happy, cheerful, lively, delighted, and joyful; Cronbach’s alpha = .90) items.

Participants rated their affective reaction using a 7-point scale from 1 not at all to 7 extremely. Because the focus of the present study was on people’s negative affective reactions to tragedy, an affect index was computed by subtracting the
average of the positive items from the average of the negative items. Thus, higher scores on the index indicated greater negative affect.

**Perceived Tragedy**

A single item was used to assess perceived tragedy, with participants indicating how tragic they thought the accident scenario was on a 1 *not at all* to 7 *extremely* scale.

**Perceived Injustice**

Six statements were used to assess perceived injustice regarding the accident scenario. Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements: “I felt that Joseph Bradley’s misfortune was unjust”; “I felt that Joseph Bradley’s misfortune was unjust because he had so much life ahead of him”; “I felt that Joseph Bradley’s misfortune was unjust because his life ended so suddenly”; “I felt that Joseph Bradley’s misfortune was unjust because he left so many things unfinished”; “I felt that Joseph Bradley’s misfortune was unjust because he had a lot of good years left”; and “I felt that Joseph Bradley’s misfortune was unjust because his future was promising.” Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with these items using a −3 *strongly disagree* to +3 *strongly agree* scale. The six perceived justice items were highly reliable (Cronbach alpha = .90) and were averaged to obtain an injustice score from each participant. Higher numbers on the injustice composite reflected greater perceived injustice.

**Procedure**

Upon arrival, participants first read and completed a consent form. Next, they completed the BJW measure and were then informed that they would be participating in a study of people’s reactions to different stories that appear in the media. Participants first read a filler news article on zoning. Next, participants were randomly assigned to read one of four newspaper articles purportedly about a person who died in an automobile accident (Appendix A). The four stories were identical except that the victim’s age (19 or 79) was crossed with the victim’s outlook on life (concerned about the future or living for today). After reading the article, participants then completed measures of their affective reaction to the article, as well as their perceptions of tragedy and injustice. Upon completion of those measures, all participants were paid and debriefed.
RESULTS

Analytic Strategy

Potential age differences in the BJW scale were assessed by conducting a 2 (Participant age: young, old) × 2 (Target age: young, old) × 2 (Outlook: living for today, living for the future) Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on the overall BJW scale and each of the subscales. To assess reactions to the article, separate hierarchical regression analyses were performed on each of the three dependent measures: Affect, Perceived Tragedy, and Perceived Injustice. The category variables (participant age, victim age, and victim outlook) were effect coded and the BJW scale was centered about its mean. The main effects variables (participant age, victim age, victim outlook, and BJW) were entered on the first step, and the two-way, three-way, and four-way interactions were entered on the second, third, and fourth steps, respectively. Only the variables that accounted for a significant proportion of the variance at one of the steps are reported in Table 1.1

Age Differences for the BJW Scale

The ANOVA on the BJW scale and subscales revealed a main effect for participant age for both the overall BJW scale and the BJW for self and for others subscales ($F$s $> 8.00$, $p$s $< .005$). No other main effects or interactions were found for the BJW scale and its subscales.

Reactions to the Article

Affect

As shown in Table 1, hierarchical regression analyses revealed significant main effects for participant age and for victim age. Older participants experienced less negative affect ($M = .28$, $SD = 1.33$) than did younger participants ($M = .90$, $SD = 1.08$) when reading the newspaper article. Participants expressed greater negative affect when reading about the death of a younger person ($M = .80$, $SD = 1.14$) than when reading about the death of an older person ($M = .41$, $SD = 1.32$). No other main effects or interactions were significant.

1 A complete analysis of the hierarchical regressions can be obtained from the second author. The negative affect and positive affect variables were also investigated separately. Hierarchical regression analysis revealed a main effect for participant age with younger adults expressing greater negative affect than older adults ($b = .23$, $SE_b = .10$, $Beta = .18$, $p < .03$). A marginally significant result was observed for positive affect with younger adults exhibiting less positive affect than older adults ($b = -.12$, $SE_b = .07$, $Beta = -.15$, $p < .08$).
Table 1. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Affect, Tragedy, and Injustice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE B</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Affect Measure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Participant age</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.0003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in a just world</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim age</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim outlook</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** $F(4, 152) = 4.32, R^2 = .10, p < .01$ at Step 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Tragedy Measure</th>
<th>Participant age</th>
<th>Belief in a just world</th>
<th>Victim age</th>
<th>Victim outlook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant age</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in a just world</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim age</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim outlook</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** $F(4, 152) = 5.66, R^2 = .13, p < .001$ at Step 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Injustice Measure</th>
<th>Participant age</th>
<th>Belief in a just world</th>
<th>Victim age</th>
<th>Victim outlook</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant age</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belief in a just world</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim age</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim outlook</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** $F(4, 153) = 6.17, R^2 = .14, p < .0001$ at Step 1.

Table 2. Belief in Just World and Participant Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Younger</th>
<th>Older</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BJW</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJW</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>.71</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>.75</td>
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<tr>
<td>BJW for Others subscale</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>.89</td>
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<tr>
<td>BJW for Self subscale</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** BJW = Belief in a just world.
Perceived Tragedy

A hierarchical regression analysis on perceived tragedy revealed two significant main effects. Victim age significantly predicted perceived tragedy. Consistent with our predictions, the death of a younger person was perceived as more tragic ($M = 5.72, SD = 1.45$) than the death of an older person ($M = 4.74, SD = 1.73$). As predicted, a significant main effect for BJW was also found. An increase in BJW was associated with an increase in perceived tragedy of the death of the victim irrespective of the victim’s age (see Table 1). No other main effects or interactions were observed.

Perceived Injustice

Results similar to those found for the perceived tragedy measure were observed for the perceived injustice variable. Victim age significantly predicted perceived injustice. The death of a younger person was perceived as more unjust ($M = 1.33, SD = 1.49$) than the death of an older person ($M = .43, SD = 1.26$). Belief in a just world predicted perceived justice. People with a higher belief in a just world perceived the death of both victims as more unjust than did people with a low belief in a just world. No interactions were observed.2

DISCUSSION

This study provided empirical evidence for age-related biases in the perceived tragedy of dying young versus dying old. We found strong evidence of this bias. Indeed, the death of a younger person was perceived as more tragic and unjust than the death of an older person. This perception, however, was not contingent on participants’ age. This finding suggests that younger and older adults share similar views regarding the value of younger versus older members of society. These results are consistent with recent findings on the activation of aging stereotypes in which no age differences in the patterns of activation for aging attitudes or stereotypes were found (Chasteen, Schwarz, & Park, 2002). The findings are also in line with research on the preferential allocation of resources to younger than to older adults (Busschbach et al., 1993) and more favorable perceptions of younger compared to older adults (for reviews see Crockett & Hummert, 1987; Green, 1981; Hummert, Shaner, & Garstka, 1995; Kite & Johnson, 1988; Lutsky, 1980). These results are also consistent with research on grief and mourning, which has

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2 Similar results were obtained for the BJW for Others and BJW for Self subscales. Those with a high belief in a just world for others perceived the deaths as more tragic ($b = .38, SE_{b} = .16, Beta = .20$) and unjust ($b = .48, SE_{b} = .13, Beta = .29, p < .05$) than those with a low belief in a just world for others. Also, those with a high belief in a just world for self perceived the deaths as more tragic ($b = .36, SE_{b} = .17, Beta = .17$) and unjust ($b = .11, SE_{b} = .14, Beta = .06, p < .05$) than those with a low belief in a just world for self.
shown that survivors experience greater grief misery the younger the age of the decedent (Gamino et al., 1998, 2000). Thus, it appears that across several domains, younger and older adults share a similar value system with respect to justice regarding younger and older people.

In addition to the robust effects of victim age on perceptions of tragedy and injustice, we also found a separate effect for individual differences in just world beliefs. Participants with a high belief in a just world perceived the deaths of younger and older accident victims as more tragic and unjust than did participants with a low belief in a just world. This effect was not moderated by victim age, suggesting that individuals high in just world beliefs are affected more by unfortunate events that occur to innocent people than individuals low in just world beliefs (also see DePalma et al., 1999; Hafer, 2000). These findings can also be related to Janoff-Bulman’s (1989, 1992) work on shattered assumptions, particularly in terms of the expectation of a meaningful world. It may be the case that BJW provides an index of the strength of people’s core assumption of meaningfulness in the world, such that those with a stronger assumption are affected more profoundly by traumatic events. Perhaps by including a BJW measure, researchers interested in the effects of traumatic events on people’s worldviews will gain a greater understanding of who is more likely to experience dramatic changes in worldviews. Moreover, including a BJW measure longitudinally would give a reliable indication of the length of the effect of traumatic events on people’s fundamental assumptions.

In terms of the present study, it should be noted that we made a concerted effort to ensure that the description of the victim’s death was minimal to avoid creating a situation in which one victim might be more easily blamed than the other. In future research, it would be interesting to see whether providing additional information about the deaths would produce differences between people high or low in just world beliefs in terms of blaming the victims or compensating their families.

The present study also highlights potential age differences in just world beliefs. We found that older adults expressed a higher belief in a just world than did younger adults. Very little research has investigated age differences in just world beliefs. Rubin and Peplau (1975) initially suggested that a “belief in a just world would be less pronounced” (p. 80) among older than among younger individuals. One reason for this difference that they propose is that by living longer the older person has had more experience with injustice. Thus, according to Rubin and Peplau, there might be an age difference in BJW, but one in which older people have lower BJW scores than younger people. Empirically, we found the opposite to be the case, with older adults scoring higher on the BJW measure than younger adults. Because the present study used a cross-sectional design, a potential explanation for this difference is that a cohort effect might exist between the two age groups. Future research should investigate the hypothesis that just world beliefs may form when one is relatively young and within the social and historical context at the time. These just world beliefs may then be relatively stable across the adult
lifespan. However, to test this hypothesis it is important that just world beliefs be examined longitudinally in order to separate the effects of age, period, and cohort.

We also found that older adults experienced less negative affect than did younger adults when reading about someone’s death. This finding is consistent with other work on affect intensity (e.g., Diener et al., 1985) and suggests that although the two age groups may not differ on perceived justice, their affective reactions to death may differ. It might be that younger adults form stronger links between instances of perceived injustice and their emotional responses to those instances than do older adults. Socio-emotional selectivity theory (e.g., Carstensen & Charles, 1998) may in part explain age group differences in affect intensity. Socio-emotional selectivity suggests that older people begin to experience fewer ties to the peripheral people in their lives while maintaining strong emotional bonds to close family members or close friends. Because people may be investing less in peripheral relationships as they grow older, their emotional reactions to the misfortune of strangers might also be muted.

Although the victim’s age and just world beliefs affected perceptions of tragedy and justice, the victims’ outlook on life produced no effects. It may be that because the other variables (victim age and BJW) were so strongly associated with perceived injustice, the outlook on life manipulation as presented in this study did not impact the reader enough to provide its own unique variance in explaining changes in perceived injustice. It is possible that the use of a newspaper vignette was insufficient for conveying the victims’ outlook thus affecting the internal validity of this variable. Perhaps using more powerful mediums such as videotapes or diary entries would give a stronger sense of the victims’ outlook on life. It would also be interesting to include additional outcome measures such as assessing victim blame and willingness to compensate relatives of the victim.

In addition to the implications of the present findings for research on age-related biases and for the construct of belief in a just world, these results also have implications for how medical treatment might be applied to patients based on their age. If it is the case that the deaths of younger people are viewed as more tragic than the deaths of older people, health care practitioners may feel a greater sense of duty to prevent the death of a younger person than an older person. Research has shown that health care professionals generally indicate that they would use more aggressive therapies on their younger patients and allocate scarce medical resources more often to younger patients than to older patients (Barta Kvitek et al., 1986; Busschbach et al., 1993). Heroic attempts to save a young person may result in using costly medical resources beyond the point where they will do any good (see Jecker & Schneiderman, 1994). Along those same lines, age-related perceptions regarding death might also hold implications for right-to-die issues. It is interesting to note that many of the landmark right-to-die cases involved victims who were relatively young, vibrant individuals before their accidents. One can only wonder how much media and legal attention would have been devoted to these victims if they had been quite old and not “in the prime of life.”
It is important to note that we found that those with a high belief in a just world believed that regardless of age, the death of an innocent person is tragic and unjust. Just world beliefs may thus have important implications for whether heroic measures might be employed to save the life of a person regardless of age. Future research should investigate the role of age-based perceptions of death and just world beliefs in these types of medical decisions.

In summary, we provide one of the first empirical demonstrations of age-based biases regarding perceived tragedy and injustice surrounding an individual’s death. We also demonstrated an important individual difference variable, belief in a just world, as influencing strongly people’s perceptions of the injustice of the death of younger and older people. These findings emphasize the complexity of people’s thoughts about aging and death. Future research would profit from identifying how just world beliefs affect people’s reactions to aging in general, how various just world scales tap into different components of perceived justice, and how people react to the misfortune of others based on the age of the victims.

APPENDIX A: Target Article

November 10
Web posted at: 1020 a.m. CST
FARMINGTON, Missouri (POST DISPATCH)—A memorial service was held for Joseph Bradley, age (19 or 79), who died in an automobile accident on Wednesday. Dozens of people attended the service to pay tribute to a man who was active in community affairs. Friends at the service described him as “the kind of person who (was always concerned about the future)/“lived for today and never worried about the future”), and that he “was always trying to do something to make things better for tomorrow”/was always trying to do something to make things better for today”). Bradley was laid to rest at Pine Lawn Cemetery on East Jefferson Street.

REFERENCES


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